



Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

Davis-Warra, John, Dooley, Karen T., & Exley, Beryl E. (2011) Reflecting on the 'Dream Circle' : urban Indigenous education processes designed for student and community empowerment. *QUT Professional Magazine*, 26, pp. 19-21.

This file was downloaded from: <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/48447/>

© Copyright 2011 (please consult the author).

Notice: *Changes introduced as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing and formatting may not be reflected in this document. For a definitive version of this work, please refer to the published source:*

Reflecting on the ‘Dream Circle’: Urban Indigenous education processes designed for student and Community empowerment

In this article, Indigenous educator, John Davis – Warra, and QUT researchers, Karen Dooley and Beryl Exley, reflect on an initiative of the URL project known as the ‘Dream Circle’.

The ‘Dream Circle’ is a space designed by and operated through Indigenous educator footprints as a safe space for the school’s deadly jarjums (Indigenous children). The ‘Dream Circle’ uses a kinnetted methodology drawing on the rich vein of Murri cultural knowledges and Torres Strait Islander supports within the local community to provide a safe and supportive circle. The ‘Dream Circle’ operates on a school site in the Logan area as an after school homework and cultural studies class. The ‘Dream Circle’ embodies practices and ritualises processes which ensure cultural safety and integrity. In this way we balance the measures that Sarra (2005) purports are the stronger, smarter realities needed for positive change in Indigenous education.

To be understood in context, the ‘Dream Circle’ is a hook – one part of the school’s approach to Indigenous education but one where jarjums and their families can interact and interface with cultural knowledges and practice as core rites and rituals to be respected and understood. The circle is coordinated by three local Indigenous education leaders and a handful of volunteers from QUT’s teacher education program. Other realms of Indigenous identity within school space include Cultural Studies classes, Didj lunch time lessons, Indigenous language classes, Indigenous student field trips and the school operationalisation of the

Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives (EATSIPs) program. In this space Indigenous identity is a strength; discourse on 'gaps' and 'deficits' has no place here.

The 'Dream Circle' is a positive strength based circle concerned with the cultural safety and mores of Murri people. Its foundation is the Yarning Circle. This is a form of communication used to develop oral skills, confidence and understanding of ritual; it is a means for practising social skilling. As a process, the 'Dream Circle' draws on the knowledges and practices shared locally through Durithunga Yarning Circles (Sheehan & Walker 2001). Core principles of respect and reciprocity are at the core of how the 'Dream Circle' is set. To get the most out of the space, the jarjums, Indigenous educators and the QUT volunteers alike must respect the processes and privilege Murri ways in the circle. Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing are integral to the full and proper setting of the 'Dream Circle'.

The safe space is created through the students forming or sitting in circle. The signalling of the 'Dream Circle' is done through calling of the circle by the senior leaders and the sounds of the yidiyidi (clap sticks). These sounds are not used in a tokenistic way; they are essential because they form part of the cultural educational yarns shared through song and dance. The ceremony starts with Acknowledgement to Country. Practising this skill enables the jarjums to build confidence in public speaking. These roles are extended at school through oral tasks and in the instance of school parades. Student leaders take turns in delivering the Acknowledgments as ways to express their respect and understanding of Country. Practising and living these processes is a core Community learning protocol.

Following circle time, food which has been prepared by the Indigenous education leaders and the QUT volunteers is shared. Whilst at a pragmatic level, this food nourishes the jarjums and

provides invaluable lessons on nutrition and diet, at a deeper level, it provides the ritual of sharing and sitting and eating. These are important skill sets to learn, develop and grow. Jarjums express their gratitude through openly acknowledging the helpers and senior jarjums are tasked with washing up duties.

Moving from the circle, time is dedicated to reading, writing and viewing time or art tasks. Students refer to this time as 'homework time' but there is much more going on. The adults ask the jarjums to choose or nominate their tasks. These tasks take many forms from homework set by the class teachers to skills development through cultural worksheets – what the jarjums call 'folder work'. Multimodal production or digital projects are an essential part of this process too. This is a time and place for positive interactions and open communication between jarjums and Indigenous teachers and the QUT volunteers. The yarnings that happen with and between jarjums and adult helpers develops the students' ability to interact and interface. Senior jarjums are smart models for the younger ones. All tasks are wedded in a kinconnected methodology grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing. Again this approach centres student identity and allows for the development of more 'authentic Indigenous education' (Davis 2007).

Students are tasked with keeping and maintaining a learning log to record and maintain a track of their work. These logs form part of the 'Dream Circle' student identities as well. The logs are folders and each folder is designed with a hand print. Handprints are the signatures of personal identity and are powerful symbols in Indigenous culture (Knox 2001). No one handprint is the same; no one footprint is the same. Students are tasked with designing the logs with a handprint – their handprint to represent themselves and their story. This story work or identity work is part of the log of activities for jarjums to complete.

Positive Indigenous education development is predicated on positive identification of self, family, kinnections and school. Thus, the 'Dream Circle' is part of the positive identification of Indigenous identity. The positive sense of self and expression of Aboriginality is shown and developed well through the last phase of the 'Dream Circle' - cultural education. Cultural education, or Kultja, is specific task time set aside for student skill development and practice of Indigenous cultural practice. Murri song and dance has been the corner stone of the skills development. Song men come to the 'Dream Circle' and share story, dance and song of the lands kinconnected to their peoples. To come and share song and dance permissions are needed and this is part of jarjums' learnings – knowing and understanding rites and rituals. Here the power of the circle, sound of the clapsticks, listening and respect to the voices of song men is melded into one space. Cultural education is an essential part of Indigenous education. This is not a regular practice in school. Knowing, being and doing Indigenous ways builds a confidence in self and ability to understand more about the world around; it is learning from Indigenous footprints.

In summary, the 'Dream Circle' is about Indigenous students having a go – being connected and kinconnected to the school and the school understanding more about the Community context. The jarjums show an amazing amount of appreciation and love for their space and the people connected to it. The jarjums shape their futures through active participation and recognition of their cultural footprint. This is their 'Dream Circle', a dream space, a safe space.

References:

Davis, W. (2007) *'Spear Making...'* University of Queensland, St. Lucia, Masters Thesis (Unpublished).

Knox, R. (2001) Personal Communication.

Sarra, C. (2005) *Strong and Smart: Reinforcing Aboriginal Perceptions of Being Aboriginal*. PhD Thesis. Murdoch University. (Unpublished)

Martin, K (n.d) *Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing: A Theoretical Framework and Methods for Indigenous and Indigenist Re-search The Australian Public Intellectual Network*, retrieved Sept 5th 2009.

http://www.apinetwork.com/main/index.php?apply=scholars&webpage=default&flexedit=&flex_password=&menu_label=&menuID=54&menubox=&scholar=105#35

Martin, K. (2008) *Please knock before you enter – Aboriginal regulation of Outsiders and the implications for researchers*, Post Pressed, Teneriffe, Queensland.

Sheehan, N., & Walker, P. (2001) The Purga Project: Indigenous Knowledge Research. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 25 (1), 23 – 29.

Acknowledgements:

We extend our thanks to the teachers and administrators who are our research partners on this project and we acknowledge the partnership of the Queensland Teachers Union and the support of the Australian Research Council. Our colleagues on the project are: Vinish Chandra, Michael Dezuanni, Allan Luke, Kathy Mills and Annette Woods of Queensland University of Technology and John McCollow and Leslie McFarlane of the Queensland Teachers Union. We thank the Indigenous Community, specifically members of Community Durithunga, for their active participation and advice.

